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# WHY RACE BELONGS IN OUR GOSPEL CONVERSATIONS

BY KEN WYTSMA

*“Only he who cries for the Jews is permitted to sing Gregorian chant.”  
—Dietrich Bonhoeffer*

**“GOOD NEWS, LIKE LIGHT,  
TOUCHES EVERYTHING IN THE ROOM.  
LIKE LIGHT, IT SPREADS, ROLLING  
FORWARD, NEVER-ENDINGLY CHASING  
AWAY DARKNESS.”**

I recently saw an Instagram post of a woman holding a book in her hand while standing in front of the religion section at Barnes & Noble exclaiming, “I can’t wait to read this one!” The book is a recently published title by a friend of mine on the subject of race and how to unpack white privilege and white identity in a more equitable and Christian manner. Many people responded to the post, chiming in with encouraging comments like, “Ohhhh, that looks great!” and “I need to get my hands on that one!”

But one comment on this post stood out among the rest. A prominent evangelical thought-leader jumped into the thread with a warning and word of caution about this kind of book. Knowing only the cover and the concept, he presumed to know the content and, based only on his presumptions, he decried how unhelpful he feels these kinds of books are for the soul. It wasn’t until he was near the end of his comment that he admitted not knowing the content of the book. Nonetheless, he went back to issuing a spiritual warning before ending his thoughts.

The leader’s comments fit a pattern that has lasted, in some shape or form, through most of the history of evangelicalism. The pattern of thought is that the messier parts of reality can distract or interfere with the spiritual parts of our being and faith. Or, put more succinctly, as long as we keep our eyes on Jesus, then what happens here on Earth, however unfortunate, is secondary. We need to “keep the main thing the main thing,” as I’ve been told. And that main thing is a spiritual telling of the gospel in tight, highly parsed language that is distinct from issues like race, privilege or worldly injustice.



# The Flaw in Our Gospel

Over the last half-dozen years, I have had hundreds of conversations with pastors—many of whom are passionate about extreme poverty, government corruption on other continents or the refugee crisis around the world—who say quite plainly, “Justice is a good thing, but we have to be careful that we keep it out of our gospel conversations.”

The thought-leader and his compartmentalization and spiritual warnings in the first instance, and pastor-theologians trying to cordon off and protect the gospel in the second, all demonstrate the flaw in our gospel that has lingered in varying ways throughout evangelical history: We think the cross of Jesus *is* the gospel.

But the cross of Jesus is not *the* gospel, but a *part* of the gospel—a part, but not the whole; a means, but not the end.

When Jesus died for the forgiveness of sins on the cross, he was operating as the perfect sacrificial lamb—the sacrifice—that had always been foreshadowed by the sacrificial system in the temple courts.

Now, when Jesus died on the cross, the Bible says the heavens shook, the sun stopped shining and there was a great commotion in the temple. It is important to note that it wasn’t the altar (what the cross symbolized) that split in half. Rather, the 60-foot-tall temple veil was torn from top to bottom, symbolizing how, through Jesus’ death, we have been reconciled to God.

The forgiveness of sins served the purpose of restoring our relationship with our Creator. But forgiveness is never the end; rather, it serves reconciliation. While the cross was *always* a means to an end, it was not the end itself. As Paul explains the gospel in Colossians 1:19–20, “God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in [Christ], and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.” The pleasure was in the reconciliation, which was accomplished *by* the cross.

The means cannot be taken in isolation from the purpose it served. So, I will say it again: The cross is not *the* gospel, but a *part* of the gospel.

Yet, for much of evangelicalism, our focus has been squarely on the cross alone—the substitutionary atonement of Christ’s death

Transaction replaced reconciliation.

Personal salvation for the individual took the spotlight rather than Christ’s redeeming work for the many. There was an overemphasis on salvation *for me*, which lessens the experiential significance of our adoption back into the family of a relational God.

If all we have is Good Friday, then we are missing Easter. If our gospel is cross only, then we cut off resurrection, which is the very hope we have as Christians and the one thing Paul says we need in order for our faith to not be foolish or us to be pitied (1 Cor. 15). How can we say that justice has no part in our gospel when Jesus came so that *unjust* people could stand next to a *just* God, as if we are *just*, through a process of *justification* whereby we are *justified*? (Hopefully the linguistic irony is evident.)

Somewhere along the line, forgiveness of sin, alone, went into our gospel box rather than the setting right (justice) of all that was broken (injustice) through the life and ministry of Jesus—what I would call the in-breaking of the right arm of God to work restorative justice for his creation. Or as Isaiah put it:

“The LORD looked and was displeased that there was no justice. He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him, and his own righteousness sustained him” (Isa 59:15–16).

If we can’t fully comprehend God without mention of his love or heart for things being as they ought to be, then how can we comprehend the gospel or his good news without reference to the same?

Much more could be said on this point, but saying that the gospel needs to be protected from justice language is to miss the point of the good news in the first place.

*“Our evangelical gospel has been too neatly dissected, defined and packaged. Its explosive and wild nature has been stripped of its original revolutionary power.”*





# A Compartmentalized Faith

Second, this flaw in our gospel, focusing on a single pixel of the screen—or grabbing the means as if it were the end—has, throughout our history, allowed us to set up a compartmentalized Christianity.

Here, in one of the most Christian nations in history, we held and trafficked in slaves for hundreds of years and kept state-sponsored discrimination and terror alive well over 150 years *beyond* when the British passed the Slave Trade Act.

The Southern states in America, statistically the most evangelical of the states, saw what they counted as “good Christian men and women” take part in lynchings on Friday nights and then occupy their normal pews in church on Sundays without connecting the two—our salvation on one hand, but something separate or ignorable on the other.

This is the gospel, protected and compartmentalized, with the plight of our neighbor boxed out as a secondary concern.

Now, the objection usually comes, “What about all those amazing Christian men and women who fought for abolition and later civil rights?” The questions in response are simply: Who were they fighting when they were laboring for rights if not the white Christian men who were in positions of civic power? Whose message were they fighting if not the message of pastors in pulpits that perpetuated racism and made discrimination religiously permissible? Ultimately, what flaw

in the thinking of their fellow Americans—that allowed self-righteousness to sit comfortably alongside exploitation and murder—were they trying to overcome?

The gospel we inherited has been too neatly packaged. Good news, however, is much different than that. Free an oppressed population, and then try to tell them that the good news of their liberation is neatly packaged and to be tightly defined, and you’ll really know how crazy that sounds. Good news of that kind is wild and boundless. Freedom speaks to all of life; it rolls into tiny corners and opens the door on a million rooms where bad news once lived.

Good news, like light, touches everything in the room. It speaks continuously into every crevice. And like light, it spreads, rolling forward, never-endingly chasing away darkness.

Jesus came to be the light of the world. He and the message he heralded about the kingdom of God was good news that he likened to

light in our lives:

Don’t hide your light under a bushel (Matt. 5:15).

A city on a hill cannot be hidden (Matt. 5:14).

Our evangelical gospel has been too neatly dissected, defined and packaged. Its explosive and wild nature has been stripped of its original revolutionary power. It has become domesticated and fits all too comfortably in our lives when comfort, security and immunity from the messy solutions to injustice are desired and appreciated.

Light touches everything in the room. So, why, when I wrote a book on race and privilege, did the greatest pushback come from those who said race has no place in our gospel conversation? Surely the good news of Jesus has *something* to say to the greatest historic injustice of the last 500 years. Surely, when Jesus came to proclaim good news to the poor and the year of the Lord’s favor (Isa. 61) it had relevance to the very real instances of bad news and oppression people were suffering.

How much different might our presence in this world look if we could deconstruct the compartments and restore the gospel message to its holistic sense of restoration of relationship, reconciliation and redemption rather than transaction, personal salvation and a consumerist disconnect from the larger story?

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# Upsetting the Economics of the City

This is exactly why the Easter message is so revolutionary for the affairs of our lives and the communities in which we live.

We easily forget that at the beginning of his Passion Week, Jesus went into the temple and, in turning over tables and driving people and animals out in front of him, he upset the economics of the city. He did this in challenging the power structures of the temple system—those who were taking advantage of vulnerable people and preventing others from gaining access to the temple and the presence of God.

The very people who thought they were at the center of salvation and God's will were the ones on whom Jesus vented his righteous anger. The religious affairs had been compartmentalized and systematized by the religious leaders while they simultaneously were guilty of perpetrating the injustices that most broke God's heart. What kind of warning should I take from this today as a church leader who certainly, not unlike the religious leaders of Jesus' day, can become ensnared in the systems, routines and economics that move things forward and maintain the status quo?

In Scripture, the linking of the good news of reconciliation is tied more often to the ethics of love than most realize. The parable of the good Samaritan followed a question posed to Jesus on how to be saved. Likewise, the parable of the sheep and goats in Matthew 25 represents Jesus' last words to his closest friends before they would all go through the trial of that awful week. At such an important moment, his message was that those who honored him by feeding the hungry, clothing the naked and visiting the prisoners would gain entrance to paradise, and those who neglected Jesus by not feeding the hungry, cloth-

ing the naked and visiting the prisoners would be sent to torment. Heaven and hell show up in the balance as Jesus pointedly discusses the inability to separate our love of neighbor from our love of him.

It is no wonder that immediately following Paul's beautiful exclamation that we are new creations in Christ (2 Cor. 5:17—"If anyone is in Christ, the new creation has come: The old has gone, the new is here!") he relays how this is situated within the reconciliation of all things: "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ and gave us the ministry of reconciliation." The gospel isn't simply good news we hear—it's good news we become. We aren't simply recipients of grace, but agents of grace as well.

Jesus represents truth *and* justice, Savior *and* King. Good news and love are part of the same fabric. The compartmentalization we do on paper with our religious parsing and formulas about Jesus evaporates in the face of the Man himself. Humans have a natural tendency to want to make the purpose of God's good news the promotion and protection of our own individual comfort, but Scripture knows none of this.

The gospel is never a formula that lives in a vacuum, but a declaration of God's restorative justice that explodes into our messy lives. It speaks to the brokenness we experience as part of the fall of creation—brokenness that is always an amalgam affecting both body and soul.

When the other apostles gave their blessing to Paul's good news of salvation to the Gentiles, I find it telling that they, too, could be saved by grace, through faith—that blessing came with only one injunction, that Paul and others "remember the poor" (Gal. 2:10).

*"The parable of the good Samaritan followed a question posed to Jesus on how to be saved."*

*"The gospel is never a formula that lives in a vacuum, but a declaration of God's restorative justice that explodes into our messy lives."*

# The Gospel and Remembering the Poor

Remembering the poor brings up an interesting aspect of salvation as well as a theme throughout Scripture—that we are our brother's keeper.

Becoming one in Christ means we become brothers and sisters in the family of God. And the intimacy of brotherhood and sisterhood certainly can't come without the familiarity of story and context. If we don't know the story of others, how can we be united in our love for them?

This has been one of the lasting legacies of race in America, and we have not told the truth about the story or been willing to listen to its nuance.

Our response has typically been that of Cain when asked by God about his brother Abel. Cain's claim that he is not his brother's keeper, in many respects, sets up the balance of the rest of Scripture where God seems to declare again and again that "Yes! You are your brother's keeper."

There are many aspects of our history of race in America that I have found helpful in exposing the lack of knowledge or empathy in white evangelicalism toward its pernicious and lasting effects. Some of these include:

- The church's role in giving legal legitimacy to taking lands, as well as a moral imperative and motivation for the program of trying to "civilize" first nations people in the history of colonialism.

- The Federal Housing Administration (FHA) and the racist policies that were created that helped millions of Americans get loans and purchase homes before and after World War II while denying the same opportunities to minorities and certain immigrants—all the way into the 1960s. What built wealth for most of America robbed it from some of its most vulnerable, all the while shaping America's big cities into the segregated cities they are today.

- That 90 percent of African-Americans fled the South in what is known as the Great Migration that flowed strongly up through World War II. The Great Migration, as I've heard Bryan Stevenson rightly criticize, was not a migration like that of birds who fly north when

the weather turns, but rather a refugee exodus from a hostile state with state-sponsored terrorism and segregation. And these refugees from the South were not readily welcomed in the North where Jim Crow laws didn't hold sway; in fact, there were many race riots, murders and widespread destruction of property as violent expressions aimed to keep these new populations from moving in or assimilating with existing groups.

But one of the most extreme forms of race history that is neglected in the telling of America's racial story is the subject of convict leasing.

Convict leasing was a way to take primarily African-American labor into a legal form of custody through frivolous laws such as loitering or vagrancy. The constitutional amendment that outlawed slavery had, of course, left a loophole in the form of being able to control and bind the freedom of *incarcerated* men or women.

After the brief period following the Civil War known as Reconstruction, the South quickly concentrated power in the white establishment, which led to the widespread taking in and leasing out of convicts. This forced labor was, in historian David Oshinsky's words, "worse than slavery." With a renewable workforce,

many were worked to death in this system, including children documented as young as 6. At one point during the period of convict leasing, the mortality rate was more than 40 percent in the state of Alabama. Can you imagine such a thing?

Alabama had the largest system of convict leasing, and Tennessee Coal, Iron and Railroad Company was the greatest user of forced labor. This period lasted up to the Great Depression, and, in many ways, was the precursor to the modern problem of mass incarceration. Not only was the human toll overwhelming, but also the correlation between convict leasing and the economic rebirth of the South is so strong that Oshinsky says, "The South's economic development can be traced by the blood of its prisoners."

I once taught a student at Kilns College who found out that one of the primary beneficiaries of convict leasing in

*"Heaven and hell show up in the balance as Jesus pointedly discusses the inability to separate our love of neighbor from our love of him."*



South Carolina was the benefactor whose name was on his high school, the street on which his Baptist church was built, and, correspondingly, the name by which his church is identified.

Again, this was done in the Bible Belt of America with some of the “best” citizens profiting the most.

And it wasn’t just back then. The fact that the United States has 4.4 percent of the world’s population but 22.2 percent of the world’s incarcerated men and women should make us wonder why our Christianity has been so punitive in nature, or why those in power can so easily dismiss black and brown bodies. Is it any wonder that we fight so hard to say that the gospel of Jesus Christ only has something to say to the salvation of these people rather than something also to say to the systems and structures that have ensnared, enslaved, often wrong-

fully convicted or inequitably sentenced them? Might Jesus care about our complicity in failing to care about restoration for those in our penal system?

What needs to happen to jar us into realizing that the picture we have is actually incorrect or woefully deficient? When we think we know the story, we freely render confident decisions based on our presumptions. Our way of interacting with race and the people we encounter daily will not—cannot—change unless our mental picture of reality is challenged, rebuilt

and expanded.

The pursuit of equality with our brother is a necessity. The rich or self-righteous can attack their brother as Cain attacked Abel, or, as in the parable of the good Samaritan, ignore him; but the truth remains that we *are* our brother’s keeper.

*“Becoming one in Christ means we become brothers and sisters in the family of God. But if we don’t know the story of others, how can we be united in our love for them?”*

## Beyond a Broken Witness

In a recent Barna study, tellingly, only 56 percent of evangelicals agree that people of color are often placed at a social disadvantage—which is lower than the national average of 67 percent. At the same time, 95 percent of evangelicals think the church plays a critical role in racial reconciliation—higher than the national average of 73 percent. Taken together, these findings reveal that those who believe they are most equipped to help with reconciliation actually don’t think it is as needed as do other Americans.

What does this say to our understanding of equality and justice as a component of our witness?

InterVarsity Press approached me with the idea that became my book, *The Myth of Equality: Uncovering the Roots of Injustice and Privilege*. They wanted to publish a book on race and privilege, written by a white evangelical, that could serve as a bridge between those at the forefront of race relations in America and the many Americans and evangelicals beginning to awaken to our racist history—a book that asks deeper questions about race, identity and responsibility.

Is there a myth of equality? There seems to be when our supposedly unbiased judicial system is 11 times more likely to give the death penalty when the victim is white than when the victim is black, or when our refugee policy still seeks to exclude men, women and families from certain countries of the world—regardless of the merits of their cases.

A compartmentalized gospel leads to a life disconnected from our fellow man and from the vulnerabilities—which God made clear throughout Scripture—that he wanted us to collectively carry on our backs so his justice would reign and men and women would be treated equally.

A flawed gospel that doesn’t see the whole picture of God’s reconciling work would rather punish than restore. It would rather move the problem out of the way than immerse itself in the messy realities of reconciliation.

Ultimately, a flawed gospel takes away our credibility as witnesses of Jesus.

How can the American dream be our North Star when God’s purpose is reconciling the world to himself and

when he has now given us this same ministry of reconciliation? (2 Cor. 5:18–20). And how can we have a gospel where we think we are forgiven and connected to Jesus when we are also disengaged from the poor and vulnerable whom Jesus says is his very self? (Matt. 25:34–40).

The apostle John makes the same arguments more succinctly: “Whoever claims to love God yet hates a brother or sister is a liar. For whoever does not love their brother and sister, whom they have seen, cannot love God, whom they have not seen” (1 John 4:20).

A gospel that can be compartmentalized is a false gospel. It permits us to live in darkness. It is a lie that baits us into self-deception.

Martin Luther King Jr. chastised, “Any religion that professes to be concerned with the souls of men and is not concerned about the slums that damn them, the economic conditions that strangle them and the social conditions that cripple them is a spiritually moribund religion awaiting burial.”

It is time that thought-leaders in white evangelicalism should no longer presume or feel the liberty to comment on an Instagram post about a book simply because it is all too easy to put it into the same boxes and compartments we have historically used to exclude sticky or messy conversations. The spiritual warnings should not come against the justice worker, but those with a pharisaical approach to spirituality. The test for the gospel should be less about the academic formula one is able to articulate, but whether it actually sounds like Jesus, sounds like salvation, sounds like grace, sounds like good news. It shouldn’t be in the definition of a pixel, but the clarity of the picture.

We have to honor our brothers and sisters and learn to make the common good a part of our aspirations. This goes against the grain of American individualism. It cuts against our deep inclinations of self-realization and advancement. Ultimately, it cuts against empire and the way we are shaped as consumers. It might disrupt our

evangelical systems or patterns of thought. The kingdom is a wholly different reality. None of us will be perfect at living justly, but we must be committed to that narrow road where we are found in our love of enemy, love of neighbor and life in the communion of saints.

This isn’t an easy vision. It is a prophetic vision that takes, as Walter Brueggemann wrote, a prophetic imagination. We should all have a dream—not an American dream for our individual selves, but a dream for an America that reflects kingdom values and relationships as closely as possible.

No matter where you are—Oregon, Massachusetts or Louisiana—what does it look like for you, your church or your business to make space for the fullness of life in learning about, standing in solidarity with and sacrificing for our brothers and sisters whose experience has been one of racism and injustice?

What matters is not how good or perfect we are at it—it’s not a competition; it is how we are progressing or becoming. Are you—am I—willing to make sacrifices and elevate concern for the other?

Hospitality is defined as welcoming the other.

When we’re in a posture of hospitality, we can’t objectify those with whom we disagree. We can’t throw stones while serving bread.

Does race belong in our gospel conversations? Of course. How can we

call it *good news* if it doesn’t speak to all the broken parts of the human condition?

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*“How can the American dream be our North Star when God’s purpose is reconciling the world to himself and when he has now given us this same ministry of reconciliation?”*

*“We have to honor our brothers and sisters and learn to make the common good part of our aspirations.”*



# HEALING THE WOUNDS

## WHAT HAPPENS WHEN LOVE WORKS IN A LIFE, IN A FAMILY, IN A CITY

BY ROB WILKINS  
BASED ON A CONVERSATION WITH CHRIS CONLEE

A few days after Chris Conlee's first birthday, his mother squirted lighter fluid on a stubborn fire and sucked back flames into her lap. When her dress caught fire, she suffered third-degree burns over 60 percent of her body.

In order to focus on his wife and two older children, Chris' father asked Janey, the family maid, to care for his infant son.

"She had become family, a friend, someone we truly loved and adored," Conlee says. "So, when my mom was in the hospital for six months, I lived under her care."

In Memphis, three years after the assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the first woman Conlee called mom was a black maid. From a very early age, a person of color meant someone who loved him.

As the senior pastor of Highpoint Church since 2002, Conlee has prayed for revival in the race-haunted city of Memphis.

"You can't have revival if hatred and divisions are prominent in your city," he says. "From the start, I saw Highpoint's greatest calling was in helping answer the question: What does it mean to unify this city and prove that love works?"

By revival, he doesn't mean a circus show or a new crusade, but a return of God's people to the obligation to love.

"Revival happens when God stirs an all-consuming love for him and others," Conlee says. "Once God's people are revived inside the church, the spiritual awakening moves out in our communities as well."

As the 50th anniversary of the April 4, 1968, assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. approaches, Conlee has seen progress in his church and city. In partnership with likeminded people, Conlee helped form the Memphis Christian Pastors Network and LeadershipWorks, organizations designed to attract leaders and problem-solve the healing of the city's deep racial wounds.

Over Valentine's Day 2017, Highpoint Church hosted a Healing Wounded History retreat. For three days, 125 Memphis pastors—black and white—gathered to experi-

ence the city's history together.

"Revival is about setting our sails and letting the Spirit—the wind of God—empower, equip and edify us," Conlee says. "I believe the heart of every major problem in the world is broken love. We have to let the Spirit move us from love not working to love working."

Only then, he says, will revival come.

Conlee knows a thing or two about love not working.

Long before his mom was burned next to the family fireplace, she had suffered great wounds. Her own mother died when she was 5. Her father remarried and died when she was 13, abandoning her to an alcoholic, abusive stepmom.

And then there was Chris' father. For those who knew and loved him—and there were many—his name was Bready, not because he drove a bread truck so much as he owned the company.

Turning a million dollars a year wasn't bad for a graduate of the

foster-care system and a high school dropout.

Through a volatile mix of will, street smarts and charm, Bready cast an image of success: warm and generous and handsome, perpetual golf club champ, citizen of the year, born salesman, friend to all in the suburbs of Memphis.

In his mind's eye, Conlee can still see his father behind the wheel of that blue-collar bread truck darting defiantly between waxed-up Porsches, BMWs and Corvettes occupying the country club parking lot.

"If you were to look at him," Conlee says, "you would swear that love was working in his life."

But Conlee knew it was not.

On Bready's flipside: a temper like a roadside bomb. On three occasions, Conlee wrestled a gun—aimed at his mother—from the adrenaline grip of his father. Bullets of profanity, spears of words, his father's finger quivering on the trigger: It added up to a lot of stress for a teenager.

"My father's life was such a juxtaposition," he says. On the one hand, he was everybody's smiling friend, the guy

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TO CHURCH TO CITY,  
PATIENTLY HEALING."



who sold you bread. On the other hand, he was an incredible mess, an orphan's rage against the weight of the pain.

Put them together, father and mother, and all you can imagine is love not working.

On April 20, 1981, when Conlee was 10, his brother Bubba shot an 8-under-par 64 to win a Memphis golf tournament. One month from his high school graduation everyone understood he was already shooting like a pro. Even for Bubba's own high standards, the achievement was not lost on him. He ran to his car so that he could meet with his dad and brother to share in the celebration.

Conlee can imagine Bubba on that warm spring afternoon: window down, hair flying, music blaring, on the cusp of achieving the Golf Dream.

Conlee and his father heard the crash of metal on metal as they gassed up the bread truck just 150 yards away from the point of impact. Chris wanted to investigate—obviously someone had suffered a major accident—but his father stopped him. “Get in the truck,” his father said. “I don't want you to see.”

Later, when they returned home, they saw three police cars parked in the driveway. Even before anyone said anything, Chris knew it had been his brother, and he was dead.

Five years after his brother's death, Conlee answered a phone call from the pastor of the church Bubba had attended. In the church's move to another location, they found Bubba's Bible. The pastor was calling to see if someone might want to pick it up.

Conlee sat in the back pew of the church and flipped through the pages of his brother's Bible. A Christmas-or-Easter Christian, Conlee had no idea what he was looking for, but in the margin next to Colossians 3:2 were the handwritten words: *My Life Verse*—“Set your mind on things above, not on things of this earth.”

The student pastor called a few days later and invited Conlee to a youth retreat in Destin, Florida. There, in the beauty of emerald beaches, he placed his faith in Christ.

The same year of Bubba's death, the city of Memphis was honored to hold the first annual Bubba Conlee Golf Tournament. The younger Conlee entered, but says it's hard to imagine the pressure he felt to win.

“Through his death, Bubba had become this larger-than-life figure, and I was somehow expected to carry on his legacy,” Conlee says. “I was a good golfer, but I couldn't win with an 8-under 64 like he did. Only he

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could do that.”

After Bubba's death, the family was shattered and separated.

“We lost far more than Bubba; we lost one another. We didn't grieve together as a family. We isolated ourselves. We self-medicated. We compartmentalized our feelings. We tried to survive as individuals,”

he says.

That reflected his family's experience with love: two horribly broken parents. A sister on drugs who was missing. A shining-star brother who was killed one month before graduation day. And Chris, a guy caught in the middle of all the pain.

In the wake of Bubba's death, his parents divorced after 34 difficult years, and his father, somewhat inexplicably, compensated by holding even tighter to the Golf Dream. From the time of Bubba's death until his junior year in college, Chris doggedly pursued that dream in the face of declining results.

He remembers the back nine at a tournament in Florida: “I finished the round with only my 3-wood, sand wedge and putter. The rest of them I broke.”

The Golf Dream was not just about achievement, but also redemption and the unfinished grief over a brother and a son, all weighing on Chris. “Part of what made it so difficult was that dying to the dream of golf was like dying to what my dad loved about me. Our family's identity was wrapped up in golf.”

At the same time, during the second semester of his junior year in college, he was left alone with his loss and the intertwined grief over his brother and his dream.

“The first real loss in my life was my brother,” Conlee says. “That was a serious time of grieving. The second grieving was when the dream of golf died. There were a lot of tears, anger and embarrassment. You feel like you're letting everybody down.”

At the same time, a chance encounter with a friend from the Fellowship of Christian Athletes led Conlee to investigate more deeply the claims of Christianity. Leading a group of athletes through Henry Blackaby's *Experiencing God*, he began to live out what he now claimed as his life verse: “Set your mind on things above, not on things of this earth.” Against the death of the Golf Dream, he began to catch a glimpse of a dream far grander.

From 1995 to 1998, drawn by a vision of kingdom life, Conlee decided to attend seminary. Near the end of his studies, he received a phone call from his father.

“Chris, would you mind officiating your parents'

wedding ceremony?”

Three years after their divorce, his parents wanted to remarry.

“They missed each other,” Conlee says. “Or at least, they missed the *idea* of each other.”

Two years later, his dad and mom divorced a second time and Bready married the woman of his affair. Conlee remembers the temptation to end the relationship with his father. Instead, his entire family continued to love on him.

“We tried to create an environment where he felt accepted not rejected,” Conlee says.

Bready's new marriage lasted eight years.

In October of 2000, Conlee was working at a church in Dayton, Ohio, but he felt a calling to plant a new church. While reading through Exodus 3—the calling of Moses—he noticed the sign from God came *after* an act of obedience. A few days later in his prayer journal he recorded his commitment to start a church. But where?

Just 15 minutes later, he received a call.

“Listen,” a man on the other end of the line said, “you don't know me, but I've been praying that God would raise up a church in Memphis that would reach the next generation. What do you think?”

Conlee read the man his recent prayer journal entry and told him he wasn't the smartest guy in the world, but he still knew  $2 + 2 = 4$ .

On Oct. 1, 2001, Conlee returned to his hometown of Memphis and began to pray for a revival. In September 2002, the first service was held at Highpoint Church with its tagline, *A Perfect Place for Imperfect People*.

Conlee's early strategy to create diversity in Highpoint Church—hire black pastors and staff—largely failed to materialize but yielded a defining truth.

“People go to church where they have friends,” he says. “In order to have a church of diversity, you have to have friends of diversity.”

In 2004, Highpoint began to partner with Overton High School, an urban school known for the arts, intentionally building diverse relationships within the football team and the theater and music departments. The church also started a ministry to single moms.

“We committed ourselves to meeting needs and building relationships for the long term,” Conlee says. “We didn't want to be people who showed up a couple times a year, took pictures of us being heroes, but never really accomplished much.”

It took many years, he says, but eventually the church acquired a critical mass of diversity through the cultivation of loving relationships.

## PERSPECTIVE FROM MEMPHIS: RUFUS SMITH

Politician-led legislation has taken our country as far as it can to equalize opportunity. Church-led regeneration of the heart will have to take us the rest of the way.

Unfortunately, Jesus-followers have put more money and muscle into the voting booth rather than the prayer closet. For America to regain its spiritual equilibrium, the church, not the world, must lead in word and deed. We do not need the majority—we simply need a critical mass of churches living a loud lifestyle of grace and truth.

There will never be true equality on Earth. There is only true equality in the spiritual life. No matter my education, ethnicity or economic status, no person or condition can stop me from pursuing God the Father's plan and purpose for my life.

Regarding Memphis: After 50 years of stewing in the guilt of Dr. MLK's assassination, I envision Memphis now writing a new narrative and grasping a new resurrection.

*Rufus Smith is senior pastor of Hope Presbyterian Church in Memphis, Tennessee, and founder of Memphis Christian Pastors Network. MemphisCPN.org*



In 2010, Conlee received a call from his father.

“Chris, would you mind officiating your parents’ wedding ceremony?”

“My father hadn’t changed much, but my mom was following Jesus and wanted to love others,” says Conlee. “I remember her telling me that marrying my father again might be the only chance he had of meeting Jesus.”

He believes he may be the only pastor to officiate his parents’ wedding twice.

Shortly after a protest of 1,000 people shut down the Hernando de Soto Bridge carrying Interstate 40 over the Mississippi River in July 2016, Rufus Smith, senior pastor of Hope Presbyterian Church, extended an invitation to Memphis pastors to come together for conversation, confession and prayer.

Conlee was one of the more than 300 people who attended. He heard the story of Smith, a black pastor who left a thriving multiethnic church in Houston in 2010 to assume leadership at Hope Presbyterian Church, the city’s largest with more than 7,000 people.

Smith was groomed by Senior Pastor Craig Strickland to be his successor and lead the church to better reflect the demographics of Memphis. In his role as senior pastor, Smith has seen the percentage of black attendees jump from 1 percent to 20 percent since 2013.

As he talked with Smith, Conlee discovered they both felt an urgent need to build more partnerships of trust within the city. With the 50th anniversary of the shooting of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. less than a year away, they shared the same fears: superficial event, reconciliation platitudes and no real change.

The meeting following the bridge protest opened up windows for empathy and doors to conversation.

“When you share stories, you begin to listen to each other. You begin to see the need to understand someone before you can be understood,” Conlee says. “When we listen to one another, you can see it from another perspective but, even more, *feel* it from another perspective.”

After sharing time together, Smith felt led to start the Memphis Christian Pastors Network. On the agenda were three questions: How do we bridge a trust gap between races? How do we bridge the education gap? How do we bridge the economic gap?

In a city with one of the nation’s highest poverty rates—nearly 27 percent—and incomes among blacks less than half of their white counterparts, they understood change would not come quickly.

Smith told the pastors, “If we can bridge the trust gap between ourselves, it will have a ripple effect in our congregations.”

On Saturday evening, Nov. 26, 2016, Conlee was praying over every seat in Highpoint’s auditorium. Suddenly, Daniel 9 jumped into his mind.

Verse 18 struck him first: “Give ear, our God, and hear; open your eyes and see the desolation of the city that bears your Name. We do not make requests of you because we are righteous, but because of your great mercy.”

“I had been praying for revival and I was struck by the fact that it wasn’t about our goodness or ability but because of his great mercy,” Conlee says.

As Daniel prayed, a word went out and the angel Gabriel appears in response. Daniel 9:23 reads: “I have come to tell it to you. And here’s the word: You are greatly loved. Therefore consider the word and understand the vision.”

“It struck me how universal God’s response is,” Conlee says. “The Great Commission is to go into all the world, so this is his statement for everyone—you are greatly loved.”

Daniel 9:24: “Seventy weeks are decreed about your people and your holy city, to finish the transgression to put an end to sin.”

As he considered “to finish the transgression,” Conlee was prompted by the Spirit to ask, “What is the greatest transgression that’s ever been committed in Memphis?” The assassination of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. immediately came to mind. At the same time, he wondered how many weeks remained before the 50th anniversary of the shooting.

Scribbling on a card, he wrote:

5 *Sundays left in 2016.*

2017: 52 *Sundays.*

2018: 13 *Sundays before April 4.*

5 + 52 + 13 = 70.

“It was exactly 70 weeks to the 50th anniversary,” Conlee says. “I literally fell on my knees and began praying. I was overwhelmed about what God was doing.”

Over three days in February 2017, 125 pastors, both black and white, gathered for a retreat. A few months earlier, Conlee had met Russ Parker, author of *Healing Wounded History: Reconciling Peoples and Healing Places*, at an event in Atlanta. With great clarity, Parker explored the power of wounded group stories and revealed how they affect the people and places where they first occurred.

After Conlee’s vision from Daniel, he decided that Highpoint Church would also host a healing event, which would encourage people to visit historical sites together. The pastors that participated experienced together the worst and best of Memphis.

One evening, a worship service was held at Clayborn Temple, the now-dilapidated church where sanitation

workers went on strike against the city of Memphis on Feb. 11, 1968.

“This is the church where they handed out the ‘I Am a Man’ signs,” Conlee says. “It had been boarded up for 20 years and part of the ceiling was falling down. So we go into this makeshift church with makeshift sound and shared powerful worship together.”

One day, they visited the site where Ell Persons, an African-American man, was lynched and burned alive while 3,000 spectators laughed, snacked and cheered.

The next day, the pastors visited St. Jude Children’s Research Hospital.

“Here’s a hospital where children are healed of cancer from all over the world and no one ever gets a bill,” Conlee says. “The experience provided an incredible contrast of what happens when we choose love over hate.”

Eighteen months after his decision to follow Christ, Bready had just shot a round of 69—a 3-under par, at the age of 73. At a high school graduation party for a young lady headed off for college, Bready said a few words, handed her a slice of cake and fell over from a massive heart attack.

It was the ending he had always hoped for—doing what he loved and loving others well.

When Conlee prays for revival he doesn’t specify a location. He understands transformation as a process. It’s a reversal of the curse of man: broken love from damaged souls. When people begin to understand the perfect love of God, it spreads out from heart to church to city, patiently healing. All the great biblical commandments can be summed up like this:

Receive his love.

Return his love.

Give his love.

In this same spirit, LeadershipWorks held its first event in Memphis on Nov. 3, 2017, focused on civil rights. By catalyzing community, church and marketplace leaders to problem solve together, the organization seeks the revival of the community.

“There are problems that exist in every city that are bigger than the parts,” says Conlee, who serves as vice president of the LeadershipWorks board. “What would happen if we could get all the leaders together to say, ‘This is my town, my time, my turn’? Every vision should ultimately be a solution to a problem. So we need to define the problem,

## “LEADING A GROUP OF ATHLETES THROUGH HENRY BLACKABY’S *EXPERIENCING GOD*, CONLEE BEGAN TO LIVE OUT WHAT HAD BECOME HIS LIFE VERSE: ‘SET YOUR MIND ON THINGS ABOVE, NOT ON THINGS OF THIS EARTH.’”

offer solutions and present compelling reasons why we need to do something right now.”

Featured speakers included Dr. Bernice A. King, youngest daughter of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.; Shannon Brown, senior HR executive for FedEx Express; John O’Leary, international

speaker, author and consultant; and Tim Irwin, a bestselling author and leadership psychologist. A video was also created to explore the history of the civil rights movement through the perspective of Dr. James L. Netters, the 90-year-old senior pastor of Mt. Vernon Baptist Church in Memphis and long-time associate of Dr. King.

The event attracted more than 1,600 people, including 600 college and high school students—and rave reviews.

“People were blown away,” says Conlee. “The event positioned us to have the credibility to be a change agent for the future in the world of leadership development.”

After 700 of Memphis’ 1,300 black sanitation workers went on strike against the city because of poor pay and dangerous working conditions, Dr. King visited Memphis three times to speak encouragement for the strikers.

His last speech—on April 3, 1968—ended with the words: “I’m not worried about anything. I do not fear any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord.”

The next day, on the balcony of the Lorraine Motel, Dr. King was assassinated.

With a focus on the concept of Jubilee, the Memphis Christian Pastors Network plans a commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the sanitation workers strike on Feb. 11, 2018.

“The biblical word *Jubilee* means to release, set free or liberate. What we are trying to do is gather community, church and marketplace leaders to verbalize the wrongs of the last 50 years but also to voice the aspirations of the next 50 years,” Conlee says. “We want to honor Dr. King by raising up more Dr. Kings. We want to be people who speak life into these matters.”

When love works, Conlee knows, revival springs.

*For more, visit [HighpointMemphis.com](http://HighpointMemphis.com) or explore the LeadershipWorks podcast on iTunes.*

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# Bryan Loritts

## MORE THAN MULTIETHNIC

INTERVIEW BY PAUL J. PASTOR • PHOTOGRAPHY BY MATT MCFARLAND

*How a diverse, reconciled church can lead us to a faithful future deeper than white evangelicalism.*

April 2018 will mark 55 years since Martin Luther King Jr. wrote his powerful “Letter From Birmingham Jail.” Addressed to fellow clergy who were criticizing the civil rights

movement, King’s letter to his fellow pastors is still haunting in its timeliness for today. While advances have been made in certain areas of ethnic and racial relations in the United States, King’s classic statement (made elsewhere) is still true: Church is still the “most segregated hour of Christian America.” Similarly, his words in the letter that





“If today’s church does not recapture the sacrificial spirit of the early church, it will lose its authenticity, forfeit the loyalty of millions and be dismissed as an irrelevant social club” seem like outright prophecy.

Enter Bryan Loritts, whose work as a pastor, nonprofit leader, author and consultant focuses on encouraging multiethnic and multicultural church organization and worship. Loritts serves as senior pastor of Abundant Life Christian Fellowship, a multiethnic congregation in Silicon Valley. Before his move to California, he served as pastor for preaching and mission at Trinity Grace Church in New York City, and as the lead pastor for Fellowship Memphis church in Memphis, Tennessee. Loritts is also president of the Kainos Movement, an organization dedicated to making multiethnic church the new normal.

We caught up with Loritts to glean wisdom for church leaders looking to encourage prophetic truth, reconciliation and renewal in their communities, beginning with their own life and staff culture. We encourage you to find and read King’s “Letter” in its entirety, and to pair his classic words with Loritts’ powerful pastoral invitation.

**Pastor Bryan, you’ve been advocating for multiethnic and multicultural church for years. Have you seen the conversation shift during your career?**

Yes. In general, I’m incredibly encouraged by our progress. When we planted Fellowship Memphis in 2003, I could only count about three multiethnic ministry models that I wanted to pattern my work after. At that point, only about 2 1/2 percent of Protestant churches were multiethnic. The statistics are a little dated, but the latest numbers I’ve seen (from 2011 or 2012) show 10 to 14 percent. That’s exponential growth!

But like anything, there’s been give and take. The church has made phenomenal mistakes along the way. Many of those have to do with the dynamics of church leadership.

**Tell me more.**

There’s a growing frustration among leaders of color serving on white staffs—they’re pretty much being asked to make bricks with no straw.

Here’s what happens: A church will hire a leader of color under the auspices of transforming a church toward multiethnicity, but it won’t invest them with the power they need. Unless you’re willing to give up significant airtime in the pulpit, you’re really just begging for a token. That is frustrating. I feel it personally and see younger minority leaders just not tolerating it anymore. I’ve officially retired from being contracted by well-meaning white leaders to find minority staff leaders. The intentions are good, but the outcomes aren’t.

**How is that influencing your current thinking?**

It’s key to the central idea of the next book I’m writing—I’m making an appeal for the death of white evangelicalism. Not white evangelicals—we desperately need white evangelicals—but for the end of what’s come to *define* white evangelicalism. It’s going to be a memoir-oriented book, drawing on my experience as a black Christian and pastor.

It’s virtually impossible to disentangle white evangelicalism from American evangelicalism, because the his-

toric gatekeepers of the movement have been white. There is a historic theology in America that has been colored in white. That’s not the problem. The problem is that white theology has been normalized as the standard by which we judge and validate everyone else’s faith and experience. That holds us back and needs to die.

**Tell us more about how the dynamics of white evangelicalism impact leaders of color in a church setting.**

I use the image in my book of what I call “multiethnic sharecropping.”

If you were to drive down a Southern road back in the early part of the 20th century, you would probably

see black people working the land. Unless you knew better, you would assume they owned it. But in reality, the system was set up so that whites owned the land, and black farmers worked it, in a cycle of generational indebtedness. The face of it was black, but the real power of it was white.

The same thing exists in churches. Dr. Korie Edwards, a dear friend, is a Jesus-loving sociologist at The Ohio State University. She researches what makes multiethnic churches tick. She has seen that minorities in multiethnic churches look to white people for permission for what is acceptable and what is not. That jibes with my experience. I’ve felt and seen it as a consultant.

**I imagine that works out in pretty subtle ways?**

Yes, but subtle doesn’t mean “not powerful.” It shapes cultures.

I can’t say how many times I’ve preached a spirited sermon that touched a chord in a lot of people, then, after the service, African-American people came up and said, “Pastor, that was so good I almost shouted.” And I think, *Well, why didn’t you?* What happened? They looked around and realized they felt like a guest in their own house of worship, and they adjusted who they were in that space.

Another example: A new African-American family will come to our church. The first Sunday, they’re dressed to the nines, suited and booted. They address me as “Pastor Loritts.” Then they join us, and six months later they’re dressing down, and I’m “Pastor Bryan.” A year later? That same minority family is now wearing Crocs to church, and just saying “Hey, Bryan.”

The issue is not what they call me or what they wear. The issue is *why*. Multiethnic churches tend to be monocultural. And minority cultures within multiethnic spaces acquiesce to white culture.

Now I want to be fair—white people aren’t pulling minorities to the side to scold them for wearing wingtips. What we’re talking about is a cultural expression. But as things are now, both cultural expressions can’t

## King’s Letter for Today

King’s “Letter From Birmingham Jail” is tragic because it is still so relevant. King was not dealing with some kind of fringe terrorist group like the KKK; he was putting his finger on what I call “evangelical passivity.” And that spirit exists today.

What white evangelicalism has to own is that passive legacy: They did not march in the streets with King during the civil rights movement. Instead, they settled for finely manicured homiletical masterpieces behind stained-glass windows while, outside, thunderous streams of water from fire hoses were knocking down little 9-year-old black girls singing “We Shall Overcome” on the streets of Birmingham. They had no vision that the kingdom wasn’t just a future reality, but that the gospel had implications for right now. To move forward, white Christians need to own that.

—Bryan Loritts

realistically share the same space. Even though what results may have a black face, it is still white-owned and defined.

**For the average pastor, a cultural dynamic like that feels intractable. How do you begin to shape a more equitable culture in line with the values of multiethnicity?**

It really starts with awareness.

I wrote an article for the Global Leadership Summit some months ago, titled “White Is Not a Four-Letter Word.” I take issue with the demonization of “white” for sport. But I believe, after spending decades in this line

of work, that our white brothers and sisters do not consciously think in terms of whiteness. If I could go back in time to talk to my 20-something self, I would tell myself, “Calm down—not everything you are quickly labeling as racism is overt or aggressive. Because they don’t see their whiteness, they are ignorant to the power they wield.”

To shape a more equitable culture, our white brothers and sisters need to flip a switch and try, as best as they can, to do a very counterintuitive thing: to see themselves as white. To think as consciously as possible that *they are white*. This is a bit like trying to make Americans aware of their accents. We have one. But many of us can’t hear it until we travel, or really analyze it.

All of us have ethnic proclivities and biases. That’s not the problem. The problem is when those become oppressive. For whites, they become oppressive when they don’t think about them strategically and steward them carefully. You can’t steward what you’re not thinking about.

**Your use of “stewardship” there is interesting. Can you unpack that?**

Absolutely. A lot of readers will have an allergic reaction to what I’m about to say, but I think that “white privilege” is a horrible term. I know I offer a variant viewpoint here, but just about everyone has some measure of privilege. What matters are the opportunities we take to steward it.

For example, as a black man, I am privileged to have parents who just celebrated 46 years of marriage. They



love the Lord. My father is still actively engaged in my life and has left me an incredible name. I say the name “Loritts” and it’s almost annoying the doors that open for me because of him. That’s a measure of privilege, and I should not feel guilty about it. What I *should* feel guilty about is if I don’t use it well.

The goal becomes something like how Tim Keller describes justice—as disadvantaging ourselves for the advantage of others. We need to use whatever privilege we have to empower others, specifically the marginalized.

Look, there’s no clearer example of privilege than Jesus Christ. He was born God in the flesh! Yet not once does Jesus deny his privilege. Instead, he uses it. He empowers others. That’s what we’re getting at: incarnational stewardship within a multiethnic space.

**Given the racial and ethnic rhetoric that’s come up over the past year or so, especially in politics, many pastors feel that reconciliation in the church is moving backward. What do you think?**

Elder boards are a good example of this. You have to watch out for what I call “plantation politics” behind the closed doors of elder boards. Unless you get minorities who are really comfortable in their identity, you leave room for white idolization that shapes decisions and church direction. If you have minorities who are not really sure of their own ethnic identity nor comfortable in it, and you partner them with powerful white men in the name of Jesus, then minorities will give in when there is a difference of opinion. I’ve seen this happen so many times. You have powerful white men, *godly* men. They make good money. Then you have godly minority leaders who may not be on the same economic base as the white person. Now, that shouldn’t mean anything under the banner of Jesus Christ, but it creates a disparity in the room, a power imbalance.

Case in point. I remember celebrating the 10-year an-

niversary of Fellowship Memphis. In the black church, an occasion like that is a big deal. We celebrate it—even in ways that some people might find uncomfortable: checks are written, money is given, that sort of thing. “We want to honor the man of God.” That’s how the black church sees it.

But at Fellowship Memphis, nothing was done for me at first. I had to bring up the topic of the anniversary—not in any kind of self-serving way, but because I was genuinely curious what had happened. The issue was not that nothing was being done for me. The issue was why. We had

white brothers on the elder board who don’t come from that kind of honor culture, and black elders who did. I wasn’t there in the inner workings of those meetings. Maybe the black elders brought up, “We should do something for Pastor Bryan.” If that happened, then they were shot down. But what I suspect happened was that simply they didn’t *say* anything. Why not? Well, now we’re back to multiethnic sharecropping—a black face, but the power is white.

White folks tend to run multiethnic churches. Even without saying a word.

“It’s virtually impossible to disentangle white evangelicalism from American evangelicalism, because the historic gatekeepers of the movement have been white.”

**So what do we do with that?**

Again, white Christians, especially leaders, must be aware of their whiteness. They need to understand the power that it wields before any positive change can be made.

It’s the same thing for me in the role of a pastor. I operate out of a position of power, just by being what I am. In my younger days I wasn’t as attuned to it, and I didn’t realize how weighty my voice was. A lot of times, when I made what I thought was a simple request or observation, people interpreted it as a directive. I didn’t realize that the power dynamics that were at play meant that what I intended and what others perceived were very different.

If you’re a white person, and you walk into a church,





join a church or exercise a position of leadership in a multiethnic church, you must realize that you are walking in with a perceived measure of power. Once you understand that, then you can understand sensitivities for being accused of stuff that really wasn't on your heart.

A lot of what white people get accused of in terms of racism is a misperception of the stewardship of their power. The first thing is to flip a switch and realize that you're white, and because of that, that you're an image of historic power in our country. Try to steward that well. As best you can.

**With that in mind, how can white Christians like me move toward empowering others?**

The secret sauce is a bit disappointing: Do life with people who are ethnically different than you.

Look at Acts 9:43. That verse sets up chapter 10, which is going to be the "Gentile Pentecost," the first major recorded outpouring of the Spirit of God on a group of Gentiles.

God is preparing Peter, a Jew, to take the gospel to the Gentiles, but he has some hang-ups. They're ethnic barriers. Peter represents a community of the historically marginalized and oppressed who's being called to steward the gospel to his historic oppressors: a Gentile Roman centurion named Cornelius. (My black eyes don't miss that nuance of the text.)

In preparation for his encounter, God has Peter stay at the house of Simon the Tanner. As someone who is constantly working with dead animals, which Jews would never do, scholarly consensus is that Simon was a Gentile. For Peter to stay in Simon's home would have been violating how Peter was raised. But what Peter doesn't realize is that God is setting him up to be a proper carrier of the gospel. But in order to fish out his ethnic biases, God doesn't have Peter read a book or go to a conference; he puts him in community with what Dr. King called the "beloved other." Peter's dream in Simon's house reorients

him. That's in the context of relationship.

This is exactly what Reggie Williams gets at in his phenomenal book, *Bonhoeffer's Black Jesus*. He describes Dietrich Bonhoeffer coming to the United States in his early 20s as a bit of a prodigy. He's graduated with a Ph.D. at a young age and comes to Union Seminary, part of Columbia University in Harlem, at the height of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1930s.

Bonhoeffer thought he was a believer, but in hindsight saw he wasn't. When he gets to the States he starts looking for a church. All these white churches didn't do it for him; he joins a historic black church. It's there he hears the term "cheap grace" from his black pastor, he teaches a Sunday school class, he follows black leadership and immerses himself in the black narrative. I'm paraphrasing a little, but basically Bonhoeffer later wrote that this was his first experience of the gospel in all its vertical and horizontal implications. He did not go back to stand for the oppressed Jews without first taking a

pit stop at the black church in Harlem.

All of us have to have a Simon the Tanner. All of us. It's the only way.

**What keeps you growing personally in this area? I imagine it can be deeply discouraging.**

Well, what keeps me calibrated in this work are close relationships, especially with white people. I have great friendships across all kinds of ethnic lines. I enjoy them all; they are all "home." I am as much at home with my mentor Dennis Rainey, who is a Jesus-loving redneck from the Ozark Mountains, as I am with my African-American godfather, Bishop Kenneth Ulmer. My wife and I vacation every year with a white couple who have become dear friends of ours. One of my great friends is the grandson of the founder of Holiday Inn. We couldn't be more unlike. Whatever your image of wealth is, it's him—but we've

been Simon the Tanner to each other.

Whenever I'm tempted to write off all white people and wipe my hands clean—usually after seeing the reactions of white Christians to an event like Charlottesville, or the latest police shooting—the Lord taps me on the shoulder and brings my friends to mind. I am not afforded the luxury of writing off a whole group of people.

Proximity breeds empathy. Distance breeds suspicion. The real grieving points over all the ways we engage divisive racial issues are the polarized responses of people of color and white Christians—you listen for a moment to how people are talking, and go "Wow. We don't know each other."

**How do we build a multiethnic staff poised to be authentic and healthy?**

We need to get the right kind of leader to guide our culture. Just getting someone of the "right" diverse color doesn't guarantee healthy results. Why? Because there's a difference between ethnicity and culture. No ethnicity is monolithic. Within every ethnicity, sociologists tell us there are different layers of culture.

**How does that look in a church context?**

In my book *Right Color, Wrong Culture* (Moody, 2014), I discuss three categories of leaders, based on their relationship to culture. I call them C1, C2 and C3.

C1s have embraced another ethnicity or culture. Like Carlton from *The Fresh Prince of Bel-Air*. He's African-American, but he is pretty white, culturally. I'm not being pejorative there or questioning his blackness. It's just who he is as a character.

On the other end are C3s. They're culturally inflexible. The Pharisees, who Jesus always clashed with, were culturally stuck. This is how Paul describes his journey prior to Christ in Philippians 3: "A Hebrew of Hebrews"—that's culture. On *Fresh Prince*, that's Will Smith:

*In west Philadelphia born and raised,  
On the playground was where I spent most of my days ...*

When he goes to the private school in Bel-Air, the producers had Will Smith wear his blazer inside out. That was their way of saying, "he doesn't fit, and he's not trying to." That's a C3.

What organizations need, at the highest level of leadership, are C2 leaders. They are secure in their identity, to the point that they can be culturally flexible and adaptable. They can go in and out of various situations, yet not lose who they are. Read 1 Corinthians 9. Paul says he is a Jew for Jews and outside the law toward Gentiles. That's a C2.

Now if we're astute, we notice that in Paul's story, he moved from a culturally inflexible C3 to an adaptable C2 after he became a Christian.

**What does that tell us?**

That culturally flexible people are *made*, not *born*.

Paul tells us. "I have become ... I have become ... I have become." One scholar tells us that this is the ability to get into another person's narrative and to feel what they feel. This is why minorities are best poised to be C2s—and not white people—because they have had so much more practice.

You cannot be a successful minority today without spending a significant amount of time around white people.

Show me any minority who's successful by the world's standards, and I'll show you a person who can relate to our white brothers and sisters. That's not a two-way street. You *can* still be successful as a white person and never have to adapt to minority cultures.

When I teach this, many whites think that these principles just have to do with minorities. But they have to do with every ethnic group. The problem is that most white people are C3s.

You can't flex, because you have been raised in an environment that caters to and favors whiteness, to the degree that you have never even learned to see your whiteness. Your cultural way of seeing the world and doing things is normalized and entrenched.

When I teach preaching at various seminaries to classes

"To shape a more equitable culture, our white brothers and sisters need to flip a switch and try, as best as they can, to do a very counterintuitive thing: to see themselves as white."

"All of us have ethnic proclivities and biases. That's not the problem. The problem is when those become oppressive."



of mostly white students, I always ask, “What’s black preaching?” They all chime in. “What’s black theology?” Again, they have a ready answer. Then I ask, “What’s *white* preaching? What’s *white* theology?”

They have a hard time. And I don’t give them a pass. I say, “Leave the room in small groups. You have 45 minutes, then come back and tell me.” They stumble. Why is that so hard for them? Because we label what’s unique and variant, and we tend to not label what’s “normal.” But of course there *is* white preaching. There *is* white theology.

#### How do you mark someone maturing in that way?

One real sign of maturity is the ability to honestly critique your own tribe.

This is where I get in trouble with my African-American and minority friends. They put on pom-poms and cheer me when I speak truth to our white siblings, but we also have to call a timeout and end our own ethnic tribalism.

It’s interesting, right after that great outpouring of the Spirit of God in Acts 10, the Jews pull Peter to the side and say, “Wait a minute—why in the world did you do that?” They pretty much castigate him for relating to Gentiles.

I’ve been called Uncle Tom for leaving the black church. There are people who question my “blackness.” It’s laughable—

I grew up in the black church, among the gatekeepers of the black church. But I’m constantly being asked by condescending African-Americans when I am going to “come home.” When am I going to stop this multiethnic experiment and return to the black church? But home is where Jesus calls you.

We need to speak truth to power. If we are in it for a paycheck, or to extend our brand, we are not going to speak truth to power because we’re going to be too worried about not getting the next invitation.

I’ve had white folks get up in the middle of my sermons and walk out. I’ve had black folks get up in the middle

of my sermons and walk out. Because if you preach the gospel right, it brings equal-opportunity conviction. To use political language, Tim Keller is really right when he says that if we preach the gospel right, on some Sundays people will leave thinking you’re a liberal, and on other Sundays they’ll leave thinking you’re a conservative. You’ll catch it on both ends. That can be a lonely place.

So we need to speak truth to power, but we also need the courage to speak truth to the powerless.

#### Tell me more.

Well, this is gospel stuff. You have to construct a philosophy of ministry where you show people that diversity and reconciliation aren’t fringe issues, but that they’re tethered to the gospel. No one gets a pass on it.

Whenever I meet with pastors who say, “Listen, this is on my heart, but it’s not where the church is. How do I approach this?” I say, “Do *not* do a four-week series on race. Preach the gospel, and show that Ephesians 2 isn’t just 10 verses long. It has 22 verses. The first 10 are about vertical reconciliation, but the second half is about *horizontal* reconciliation. You have to show people that Jesus says that the great commandments are supposed to be vertical then horizontal.” The second is like it—“love your neighbor as yourself.”

It’s central: John asks how you can claim to love God if you hate your brother. The biblical understanding of “hate” was not what we think of today. It was *separation* and the indifference that led to that separation. So when Jesus says in Matthew 10 that you can’t follow him unless you “hate” your family, he’s not calling you to feelings of ill will, but to a new degree of separation, a new allegiance.

So when you have one member of an ethnic group refusing to do authentic community with someone from a different ethnic group, biblically, that is the kind of hate that John is talking about. And if that’s present, it invalidates our gospel.

“There’s no clearer example of privilege than Jesus Christ. He was born God in the flesh! Yet not once does Jesus deny his privilege. Instead, he uses it. He empowers others.”

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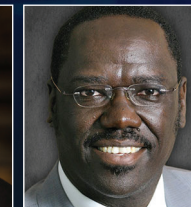
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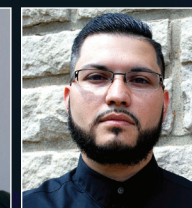
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“Proximity breeds empathy.  
Distance breeds suspicion.”

That means we have to be able to connect the vertical with the horizontal or we miss the gospel. We have to show people that it is incongruent with Scripture to claim to be reconciled to God and yet remain unreconciled with your neighbor.

### Does the surrounding world right now sense the hypocrisy that's in our racial relations as Christians?

Absolutely. This is why I'm done with the term “evangelical.” I'm thoroughly orthodox, in all the traditional ways, but that name has become worse than meaningless.

And unfortunately, monocultural church has been a big part of the problem. Korie Edwards observes that homogeneous churches entrench racism. What she's saying is that necessary instruments for our sanctification are people who see things differently. When done right, the multiethnic and multicultural church helps unearth our biases. But if you don't have people around you who see things different from you, your political, ethnic, economic worldviews are only going to be entrenched. So as a matter of your own personal health, you need to be around people who are different from you.

But you need to do it in a healthy way. I tell my white friends all the time: Don't just get into diverse relationships; get into diverse *peer* relationships. If the only people you're doing life with are people you are helping, you will inevitably entrench the very thing you're trying to combat, which is a patriarchal inequality. You need peer relationships with people who don't need you.

Like me—I can actually take you out to lunch and pay for it. [Laughs] I have great credit. I own a home in the Bay. So yes, help people. Yes, adopt cross-ethnically if that's what God leads you to. But you also need peer relationships with people who can help you learn how to do the hair of the ethnically different baby you just adopted.

### We're back again to relationship. What parting words would you have as encouragement for church leaders?

Do not bear the burden alone. Don't try to shoulder the task of diversifying the whole church or the whole ministry by yourself.

First, you have to inspire people. It's simplistic: If people are still coming to church out of relationships, then our sanctuaries reflect our dinner tables. So if you want a diverse sanctuary, then you have to have hundreds of diverse dinner tables. We all share that invitation; we all share that burden.

Second, you cannot authentically lead people to a destination that you are not traveling to yourself. Any leader who trumpets multiethnic ministry but has monoethnic relationships is a hypocrite.

I sometimes wrestle with why Paul said “all Scripture is profitable” when it comes to genealogies or lists of names. But then I read the ends of Paul's letters. Those give us a bird's-eye view into the multiethnic cohort that Paul

traveled with and the multiethnicity of the churches that he planted. There are Jewish names, Gentile names, even a black name—“Rufus,” he had to be black [laughs]. In fact, the reason that Paul's thrown in jail for the last time is that he's accused of taking his dear friend Trophimus into a place forbidden to his ethnicity. But Paul wasn't skewed! He did a lot of things as a Jewish man to show sensitivity to Gentiles, but he also did a lot of things as a Jewish man to show sensitivity to Jews. One of the most hilarious examples is when Paul picks up Timothy, who only had a mom and grandma, and says, “Listen, buddy, we're gonna be hanging out with Jews, so ...”

... So time to get it snipped! [Laughs]

Yeah! “It's a 20 shekel copay ...” [Laughs]

But that's really beautiful when you think about it. We see Paul concerned about all ethnic groups. Romans 1:16 is a popular evangelistic verse, but hear it through its sociological lens as well: “For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*”

All that to say, Paul did not just flock together with birds of his feather. He did life diversely. If you don't have that, pray for it. Then keep your eyes open. God will answer that prayer.

### What are you praying for right now?

I remember sitting at our last Kainos conference, with about 1,500 people, thinking that the only people in the room were the ones interested in the conversation. *I need to figure out how to get in the room those who aren't interested in the conversation, I thought. I need to figure out how to get people who not only aren't interested, but are antagonistic to the conversation.*

That's what I'm trying to figure out. That's what I'm praying for—how to connect with those who

aren't even interested in having the conversation with the renewal that comes when you honestly embrace the reconciliation of the gospel.

*Paul J. Pastor is Outreach editor-at-large. His latest book is The Listening Day: Meditations on the Way (Volume Two), from Zeal Books. He lives in Oregon. Connect with Paul at PaulJPastor.com or @PaulJPastor on Twitter and Instagram.*

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